



BOOK REVIEW

Daria Dubovka (2020). *V monastyr' s mirom. V poiskakh svetskikh kornei sovremennoi dukhovnosti* [To the Monastery in Peace: Searching for Secular Origins of Contemporary Spirituality]. EUSP Press

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ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

This research was supported by the grant of the Russian Science Foundation (#20-18-00240)

This book was published by the European University in Saint Petersburg, which is one of the leading research universities in Russia. It is authored by Daria Dubovka, the European University graduate, who studied under J. Kormina and S. Shtyrkov, leading Russian scholars in anthropology of religion, and it is written after extensive fieldwork in Russian monasteries. This cover information would promise an exciting read and no reader will indeed be disappointed. But what captured my attention from the first lines of the book was the pristine personal voice of the author who engages her readers in a candid conversation and erudite reflection about what it means to be a devout Orthodox Christian today.

While starting with criticizing essentialization of distinction between secular and religious spheres and of “othering” religious individuals, Dubovka strives to formulate and to practice the methodology that would allow scholars of religion to describe inner transformation that individuals undergo in the monasteries without either yielding to Christian—“native”—categories or reducing personal religious experience to external factors and structures (see p. 20). This quest for methodology is, in essence, spurred by the question about the agency of religious individuals and, as Dubovka defined her intention in the *Conclusion*, can be equated with “practical theology” (p. 185).

The study is based on participant observation in a number of Russian convents during longer periods of time over several years and on the interviews with their inhabitants—from abbesses to pilgrims and tourists. Given severe conditions of monastic life and lower status of temporary laborer, assumed by Dubovka, on top of gender inequality in the Orthodox milieu, this ethnographic research is an outstanding achievement and fully merited its praise from “official opponents” during the Dissertation defense at the Museum of Anthropology and Ethnography (*Kunstkamera*) in 2017. However, while sympathetic of the practical challenges this fieldwork caused to the author it is for the intellectual challenges Dubovka poses before the reader that I admire her study.

The first two chapters take us from history and brief description of the current socio-economic state of Orthodox monasteries to the ascetic practices that are exercised there. Late Soviet fascination with Russian national tradition as well as disenchantment with Communist ideology paved the way for the restoration of religious monuments and revival of religious communities after the collapse of the USSR. Both trends coalesced around resuscitating historical Russian monasteries such as Goritsy Monastery, or Goritsy Convent (*Воскресенский Горичский монастырь*), whose architectural complex survived the Soviet atheism—mostly in a deplorable state, though. Yet, material circumstances of bringing religious life back to dilapidated buildings limited rigidly what kind of spiritual exercises can be practiced.

Priorities in resource distribution were given to sacred spaces such as Churches and to survival infrastructure such as silos, cattle folds and farms. Living quarters are the last to be renovated and there is next to nothing that remains to be allocated for installing modern sanitary facilities such as hot water supply and canalisation. While patristic ideal showcases incorporeality of monastic body, which is likened to angelic nature, and calls for transcending all the needs of the flesh, “of all the ascetic practices dealing directly with the body, the monasteries of today can afford only restrictions on hygienic habits of modern women” (p. 72, my translation from Russian—A. M.). As Dubovka emphasises,

despite the proclaimed monastic ideal, which seeks to transform human being into bodiless spirit, it is in the monasteries where a sweating and grimy body found its legitimate haven... In turn, this unwashed body helps to maintain asocial monastic community, where relationship with God is superior to relationships with fellow humans. (pp. 76–77, my translation from Russian—A. M.)

Another limitation stemming from socio-economic conditions of the monasteries at present is the dire need for labor, mostly unskilled and routine labor. Since monasteries can rarely afford hired professionals, they have to employ for their chores the unpaid temporary laborers who come to the monasteries with their spiritual needs. Temporary laborers are willing to exchange their manual labor for the spiritual rewards such as spiritual guidance, prayers on their behalf, atonement, etc. But both permanent and temporary inhabitants of the monasteries who have to work for the monasteries’ survival feel that “labor has become the opposite of prayer (*антонимом молитвенной деятельности*) in modern monasteries” (p. 82, my translation from Russian—A. M.). In this case, “prayer”

refers to hesychastic practice of spiritual contemplation and repetition of Jesus Prayer, which requires intense concentration and withdrawal from the mundane. However,

while most inhabitants seek special religious experience, the monastery can guarantee only an ordinary routine of labor. Consequently, monks and laborers face a complicated task of transfiguring their labor such as peeling potatoes, watering gardens, and washing windows, into a source of spiritual experience (p. 95, my translation from Russian—A. M.).

Whereas the first chapters dealt with current socio-economic situation of the monasteries and ensuing restraints on ascetic experience, the third chapter aims at “demonstrating that current monastic practices of self-transformation (*практики работы над собой*) originated in recent Soviet past rather than having ahistorical or pre-revolutionary provenance” (p. 37, my translation from Russian—A. M.). Unlike patristic examples of asceticism, in which humility was achieved by subverting social decorum, modern humility is cultivated by the very organisation of labor in the monasteries rather than by engaging in an unbecoming labor. Labor is organised in a way that challenges people’s innate moral intuitions, for instance, by subordinating older persons to the younger or assigning physical labor to those who come to the monastery in the hope of hesychastic contemplation. The inhabitants have to devise ways to spiritualise their everyday existence in the monastery because there is little else available to them in their search for spiritual transformation (see pp. 100–101). The monasteries reenforce this reinterpretation of the everyday labor by “institutionalising the practice of obedience (*послушание*)” (p. 117, my translation from Russian—A. M.). The notion of “obedience” refers to specific labor tasks assigned by the superiors. By using this moral notion to describe routine labor operations the inhabitants reimagine their chores as spiritual exercises. As Dubovka summarises,

as a current response to the fundamental paradox of monasticism—how can one be bodiless while having a body?—contemporary nuns strive to achieve robotisation (desirable even if unattainable) of the body rather than to subjugate the flesh with fasting and chains. Obedient body – a mechanism for labor operations—is also best suited for simple manual work, which is required in contemporary nunnery (p. 119, my translation from Russian—A. M.).

Both strategies of conceptualising spiritual transformation in modern monasteries – robotisation through “obediences” assigned in everyday labor rather than virtue exercises and prayerful contemplation underpinned by new-age “energy” imaginary rather than traditional hesychasm—can be explained, in Dubovka’s view, by the Soviet cultural legacy that current inhabitants bring with them to the monasteries.

In the fourth chapter, D. Dubovka points out that

after some time, tough, those who come to the monastery to work on their selves (*нацеленные на работу над собой насельники*) have to acknowledge that

current monastic view on human nature cannot be wedded to the techniques of self transformation, couched in the metaphor of progress[...] those who came with the hope of achieving progress in spiritual work by systematic exercises find themselves at a dead end (pp. 141–142 my translation from Russian—A. M.).

Thus, the question of agency of religious individuals arises. Whereas Saba Mahmood criticised secular notion of agency as resistance to any authority and argued for religious agency, which could be expressed in a voluntary obedience to the chosen authority, Dubovka insists that “these two notions of agency are no longer impervious to each other” (p. 124, my translation from Russian—A. M.). Modern religious individuals are never immune to doubt or to alternative interpretations of their monastic experience. When the monastery cannot adequately satisfy the spiritual needs of its inhabitants because its routine flattens the ladder envisioned by John Climacus and locks the inmates up in the recurrency of tedious labor, religious individuals can abandon the monastery. But their choice is not limited to religiosity in the monastery or secularism beyond its walls. They can remain religious and pursue their religious quest of self-transformation. Moreover, they can argue that their religious experience is more under their control and can be better cultivated outside the monastery. Thus, if we rely on longitudinal observation in our assessment of agency, we will need to re-conceptualise the opposition between secular and religious agency and extend S. Mahmood’s notion of religious agency.

In the final chapter, Dubovka analyses the case of charismatic leadership. In a charismatic community, spiritual gifts are bestowed on the elder—community leader—and only through him can be transmitted to other individuals. Besides, these exclusive gifts of the elder include clairvoyance. Therefore, “ritual communication cannot be separated from everyday communication; consequently, any conversation can be interpreted in a sacred register” (p. 170, my translation from Russian—A. M.). Thus, “in Nikolskoye, interpretation has become the key to reproducing charismatic authority” (p. 176, my translation from Russian—A. M.), as the community members constantly convince themselves and their fellows in their leader’s clairvoyance by interpreting—with the benefit of hindsight—any of his utterances as prophetic. This confidence in the leader’s divine grace allows the members to defer all responsibility for their lives to the purview of their leader.

In the previous chapters, Dubovka demonstrated how robotisation through manual labor in obediences and energy manipulation in prayerful contemplation reflect, respectively, organisational and mystical aspects of modern religious experience. However, in the charismatic community, another—communicative aspect—comes to the fore. Thus, the question of religious agency devolves to the question of how the practice of interpretation is performed by the religious individuals in specific circumstances. The latter question can only get an adequate reply on the basis of empirical research, or to be precise on the basis of ethnographic methods. Daria Dubovka’s book is a brilliant example of empirically grounded and theoretically rich study of modern religiosity in Russia.